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Contents

Some Remarks on the Fur Trade in Michigan in Early Historic Times, By Emerson F. Greenman
Furs - From Trapper to Wearer, by Osias Zwerdling
Merchandizing in Ann Arbor in the 1890's, by E. F. Mills

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Some Remarks on the Fur Trade in Michigan in Early Historic Times

By Emerson F, Greenman,
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During half of Michigan's three hundred years of recorded history the most important industry was its fur trade, and even if it is true that the summer resort industry in this state is at present the most important, we are at any rate still using the same resources, the lakes, rivers, and forests, which made the fur trade possible. With respect to the automobile, which has assumed so much importance in Michigan commerce in the past forty years, it might be advanced that its chief purpose has been to get the tourists to the summer resorts.

A great deal has been written on the subject of the fur trade, and one gathers that the Indians were cheated, that the traders either lost money or made more than they were entitled to, that the entire business did little to improve the region and its inhabitants, and that the coureurs de bois, first under French rule and later under the English, were the only ones who really enjoyed the life. However, it was inevitable that the traffic in furs should be the first major industry in a region such as this when the whites first came. There was a market in Europe, the fur-bearing animals were running loose, and the Indians, skilled in hunting and trapping them, were there to do the work. Above all, the Indian was a savage, with no knowledge of the European way of doing business by means of which he could even begin to apply the native shrewdness with which he conducted his own affairs. The French were quick to take advantage of this. There is an interesting passage from Cadillac's letters in which he explains to his superiors in France why the Indians traded with the French although goods were cheaper with the English.

> Each savage, taking one with another, kills only 50 or 60 beavers a year, and as he is near the Frenchman he borrows from him, and is obliged to pay in proportion on his

> return from hunting, and out of the little which remains to him hs is compelled to make some purchase for his family, and in that way he finds himself unable to go to the English because his remaining goods are not worth the trouble of carrying farther, not being sufficient to repay him the cost of the journey. The second reason is that in resorting to the French they receive many flattering attentions from them, especially when they are well off, making them drink and eat with them, and in fact they contrive matters so well that they never let their furs escape; hence the desire to go to the English always exists in them, but they are skilfully reduced to being unable to put it into execution.

It was an accident of geography plus the intrenchment of the English around New York that brought the French into Michigan from their settlement in Quebec, in the latter part of the seventeenth century. They were diverted from going south because of the powerful Iroquois nation on the south side of Lake Ontario, an ally of the English, and so the waterways of the St. Lawrence and Ottawa Rivers lead conveniently to the junction of the three great upper Lakes at Michilimackinac. This was the country of the beaver, and when we talk of the early fur trade in Michigan we are talking largely of the beaver pelt. Beaver were more numerous and their pelts were superior in this region, and to the west about the headwaters of the Mississippi River. Other animals taken for their pelts were the martin, fox, lynx, mink, otter, badger, wolf, muskrat, skunk, bear, and even deer and moose. In his arguments for the founding of Detroit, Cadillac mentions the buffalo, and while there are said to have been buffalo in the small prairie regions of southwestern Michigan, the pelt never assumed any commercial importance as it was found only at considerable distances from the larger posts, and was heavy and cumbersome to carry. The greater importance of the beaver pelt is reflected in the fact that it was used as a medium of exchange, and came to be referred to throughout the Lake country as "Michilimackinac currency".

During the last twenty years of the seventeenth century, the position of the French at Michilimackinac became increasingly difficult, because of the English post on Hudson Bay, established in 1670, and because of the frequent offers of peace by the Iroquois to the Michigan Indians for the purpose of diverting their furs to the English in New York. It was for these reasons that Cadillac established the post at Detroit. To the Indians this site was known as Tjughsaghrondie (an Iroquois word). Cadillac named his post Fort Ponchartrain. Upon its establishment he invited all the Indians residing at Michilimackinac to come and settle there, and incurred the displeasure not only of the Jesuits who had built up thriving missions at St. Ignace, but also of many French traders. In an interview with Count Ponchartrain, Minister of Louis XIV, Cadillac gave as one of the reasons for bringing the Indians to Detroit that, whereas formerly they had hunted only to the north of Lake St. Clair, being now established at Detroit they brough in furs from as far as

600 miles to the south of Lake Erie, thus diverting to the French the product of a large area which previously had gone to English markets. This appears to have been no idle boast of Cadillac's, for in 1708 the Ottawa and Huron of Detroit were sending war parties against the Chickasaw and other tribes in Tennessee and southward.

At the time of the founding of Detroit by Cadillac in 1701, the fur trade had reached a low ebb. Michigan was full of coureurs de bois, who were unlicensed traders and beyond the control of the military, and the market was overstocked with beaver, with a resulting decline in price. Parkman gives as one of the reasons for this condition that the size of hats had been reduced by the hatters, and that rabbit fur was mixed with the beaver. The French had in any event made every effort to lessen the supply, even attempting unsuccessfully to recall all traders from Michilimackinac. As a result, those who were put in charge of the Company of the Colony, which had the fur-trade monopoly at Detroit, were instructed not to have anything to do with the beaver pelt. The manipulation of the forces involved in this problem have an extremely modern ring. Parkman states that when the new company was formed in 1700, they took from the former company 600,000 pounds of beaver, at half the usual price. The French markets refused to buy, so three-quarters of the supply was burned, and to rid themselves of what remained they begged the king to issue a decree requiring hatters to put at least three ounces of beaver into each hat. In connection with this decline in the market for beaver it is interesting to note that the price of the finer furs was always in a state of fluctuation because of the abrupt and sometimes unaccountable changes in fashion. To this has been attributed the fact that the animals bearing those furs were not all killed off in a short time but were given occasional respites in which to become replenished. The change from the tall beaver hat to the silk hat had much to do, of course, with the declining fortunes of the American Fur Company at a later time.

In contrast to the monopolies which under the French regime restricted the fur trade to a very few (a "fur trading aristocracy," as one writer has called them), under the English rule, which began after the Pontiac Rebellion in 1763, trading in furs was made free to anyone who asked for it. Both policies resulted in confusion: under the former the prohibitions gave rise to widespread violations, and under the latter policy the traders divided up into groups which waged bitter war upon one another to the detriment of all concerned.

The American government took possession of Michilimackinac in 1796, but the fur trade remained in the hands of the British and their French and half-breed employees for some years afterward. The Americans introduced the factory* system, which attempted to help the Indian in his dealings with the traders by keeping him supplied with merchandise which was worth the price, forbidding the sale of liquor, and keeping all transactions on a fair and honest basis.

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*The first meaning of "factory" is a trading station and storehouse for furs as also for needed commodities, operated by factors or agents of the government.

The agent of the government, the factor, was empowered to receive and dispose of goods for the Indians, and all employees were required to give an oath that they would not engage in the trade except on behalf of the agency. Every person wishing to engage in the trade was required to take out a license, which was granted for two years, and was revocable if it was found that the trader did not act in his dealings with the Indians according to the policies of the government. This differed from the English system in adding one more element to those already competing for the largest share of the spoils. There were now the factory, the private company, and the independent trader. Complaint was made in 1809 that the factories on the lakes were making poor returns on account of the ruthless competition. It was stated that in that year the sale of hatter's furs did not exceed 10,000 raccoon skins, 3000 muskrats, and about 50 beaver pelts. The factory system was not a success. From the first it was an attempt by the government to regulate the fur trade, and its opponents were convinced that it was of no real benefit to the Indians. However that may be, it was discontinued in 1822. If this problem were being worked out today there is little doubt that we would be hearing the phrase "socialization of the fur industry," for the arguments against it then were much the same as those we hear now concerning government ownership of modern industries. It was said, for example, that the government officials were salaried men who lacked the energy and hustle of the trader, his knowledge of practical affairs, and the actual conditions out in the woods where the pelts were secured.

The coming of the Yankee settler, with his agricultural inclinations, meant the end of the fur trade in Michigan, and it was of course an outcome of the American victory in the War of 1812. If England had won the war, agricultural settlement would have been delayed; and if the French had been able to hold Canada against the English, the trapping and sale of furs might still be Michigan's foremost industry, for with the French it was very much a way of life as well as a means of making a living. The outcome of wars sometimes have in them a large amount of accident, but it was not so with the coming to an end of the Michigan fur trade, for an ancient pattern was followed. Throughout history and prehistory, the hunter and trapper has always had to give way before the agriculturist.

Ann Arbor, Michigan
March 20, 1944

Additional Remarks on the Early Fur Trade, contributed by request,
By Dr. F. Clever Bald
Instructor in History, Univ. of Michigan

Some of the furs sent out of the North by the English came from the post at Mackinac, through agents at Detroit, to the Northwest Company, organized in the 1870's, with headquarters at Montreal.

While the beaver may have been most desired by the French, it was about gone when the English were most active. By 1800 and even before, muskrat and raccoon were more numerous. Raccoon became, however, a drug on the market; traders at Detroit were urged to unload them in the East if possible instead of shipping them to England.

The fur trade in those days was a gigantic gamble, involving terrific chances over which the traders had no control whatever. Frequently two years would elapse between the time that certain merchandize left England and American furs got back to England in exchange. Much could happen in two years: war in Europe, Indian troubles, bad trapping seasons. The method the traders used was to send an agent into the woods who would either travel with the Indians or arrange to receive the furs from them.

The practice of James McGill of Montreal, for whom McGill University was named, probably the wealthiest man in all Canada, was typical. He would order goods from England on consignment for Detroit, taking no responsibility for their safety. If boats were lost between Montreal and Detroit, as they frequently were, the Detroit trader, not being insured, stood the entire loss. John Askin, the well-known Detroit merchant, was quoted as saying, "The man who trades least here stands to lose least." The big money was made by the big companies who controlled the merchandizing in Montreal and London.

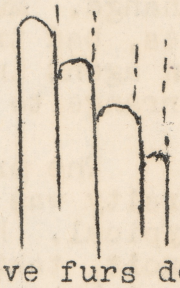
Ann Arbor, Michigan
March 20, 1944

Furs - From Trapper to Wearer

By Osias Zwerdling
(Fur dealer in Ann Arbor since 1904)

The processing of furs goes back to beginnings so unattractive that a lady who witnessed it might not care to wear the finished coat. The pelt is pulled off the animal and balled; the fat is scraped off, and the skin is treated with chemicals to preserve it from spoilage. These pelts are made into bundles and sent to some auctioning center, usually in this region to St. Louis. They are auctioned off while still skin side out, so that the bidder does not see the right side of the fur at all until he gets home with his purchases. In this way it is easy to "lose one's shirt," and many a fortune has been lost by wrong judgement at this point.

The skins of varying sizes and shapes must now be joined together in such a way as to allow later cutting to a pattern. In the case of mink, the pelts are likely to run about 15 inches long, and yet a lady's coat must not have crosswise seams. This is cleverly managed by cutting the furs into narrow strips the length of the pelt, and sewing these strips together, side by side, dropping each strip an inch or two consecutively as the sewing proceeds, thus: . . . . . After the required size is reached, the large piece of fur is badly wrinkled, and yet it cannot be touched by a hot iron. So it is nailed while wet, hair side down, flat on a board, and dries entirely straight overnight.



Now it needs glazing and blending. The more expensive furs do not need this, but about 90% of furs will show dull or blotched or light-streaked areas. In these cases the fur dyer must take dyes on a fine brush or a feather and skilfully retouch every hair until the color is satisfactory.

The cutting and sewing into the finished garment is the last step in a long process. One man working alone today, even with all the aids of modern machinery, would require a month to produce one mink coat, and in 1904, when I began work as the first furrier in Ann Arbor, it would have required three months for hand sewing.

About 40 kinds of furs are being used for garments today. Many trade names are applied to the same furs treated with different dyes. A muskrat, for instance, would scarcely recognize himself if he could walk into a store and look at all his brothers under such names as Hudson Seal, Blond, Sable dyed as well as Silvertone, Silver, Golden, and Jersey Muskrat,- to list only some of the present names. This is even more true of rabbit furs. Sixteen million rabbit skins were exported last year from Australia, and have been made up in about 200 different kinds of furs.

The making of fur garments has been an art which could hardly be mastered by each lady in her own home, as was true of silk dresses, and it did not reach its present state of near-perfection until 25 years ago. It can truly be said that the art of the skilled furrier and fur dresser has revolutionized the fur trade.

(Remarks contributed from the audience)

It seems as if the fur trade is being revived. Are there not more skins of muskrat, mink, and fox being caught now in Michigan than in the declining days of the fur trade? Not long ago I would swear there were 5000 coonskin coats walking about on the campus!

Yes, and many furs are now coming from ranches. Fur farming is being done on a tremendous scale in Wisconsin, notably by the Fram Brothers who raise pedigreed Silver Foxes and sell at auction every six months about a half million dollars worth of silver-fox pelts. Michigan fur farms are not so large, but there are nearby ones at Jackson, Adrian, Napoleon, and on the Ann Arbor-Saline road.

Ann Arbor, Michigan
March 20, 1944

Merchandizing in Ann Arbor in the 1890's
By E. F. Mills
(In Ready-to-wear Business in Ann Arbor for 35 Years)

Before we smile at the merchandizing of fifty-five years ago, we should realize the handicaps under which those early merchants worked. Fifty-five years ago there was not a typewriter, cash register, or even a fountain pen in all Ann Arbor. Grocers' shelves lacked all the packaged goods now so universally used. Dry goods merchants carried many accounts that were settled only every six months and quite often but once a year. The only ready-to-wear consisted of a few bag-like coats, which could not be sold to modern ladies. Women bought twenty yards of silk for their go-to-meeting dresses, which were then expected to last ten or twelve years. The ordinary dress was either a calico, costing 5 to 10 cents a yard, or a gingham, at as much as 10 or 12 cents a yard. Men's ready-made clothing was just beginning to displace the home-made article. Meat markets sold you your meat without benefit of refrigeration, and you ate it asking no questions for conscience's sake. Chain stores were unknown and specialty stores were yet to make their appearance. Sales ladies were just beginning to be an addition to the selling force of a few stores, and some of the older merchants still felt that a woman's place is in the home. Advertising was in its infancy. The "ads" in the two local papers were usually 3 or 4 inches, single column, and were seldom changed oftener than 3 to 6 months. I remember one ad of Christmas presents that was cheerfully calling our attention in the following July. The tempo of business was not very rapid, as these illustrations show.

If fifty-five years ago you had alighted from a M.C.RR train for your first visit to the University city, you would have been impressed with the beautiful new station facing you. This had been built only a year before, and at that time was one of the finest in the west. This led you to expect to find Ann Arbor an up-to-date modern city. But as you passed through the station, you came out to face several old hacks drawn by decrepit horses struggling in a sea of mud. By the time you were dropped at the old Cook Tavern and taken to your room in that dilapidated hostlery, your first impressions had undergone a decided change. As you sallied forth to view the town, you naturally began with Main Street. There are but few Ann Arbor citizens of today who remember the Main Street of that far-off period. Although Ann Arbor boasted 8000 inhabitants and called itself a city, it was still a sleepy, country village, lacking many improvements found in Michigan cities of half its size.

The city and county were largely peopled by solid, industrious Germans. The revolution of 1848 had caused thousands of them to flee to America. Of these, hundreds settled in and around Ann Arbor. They brought with them their age-old thrift, and also hatred of taxes. As they were in the majority they thwarted many improvements that called for increased taxation. As a consequence, Ann Arbor lagged behind its neighbors in many ways. At this time there was not a paved street in the city. Stores and houses were largely lighted by gas.

The new electric street lights were turned off at midnight. Only one store in the city, Schairer & Millen's Drygoods, boasted plate-glass windows, and these windows had been installed the previous year. Window displays were practically unknown. Main Street, dirty and unpaved, was either a quagmire of mud in the spring or swept by clouds of dust in summer. Street cleaning was done Saturday mornings when the clerks hoed and scraped the week's accumulation of filth into neat piles which the city later deigned to carry away. Merchants and clerks took a leisurely noon hour or more going home for their noonday dinner. There was but one restaurant in the city, the Portland Cafe,- where there are 84 today. Hitching posts in front of each store accomodated dozens of horses that hauled wagons and buggies to town for their owners to do their weekly trading.

In summer great swarms of flies buzzed over the horses as they stamped and shook to rid themselves of the pests. The flies kindly divided their attentions between the horses and the store interiors, adding greatly to the comfort of the shoppers. If you had walked down the west side of Main Street on a hot July afternoon, you would probably have seen two easy chairs on the edge of the sidewalk, occupied by Philip Bach of the drygoods store of Bach & Abel, and his friend and neighbor Wm. Allaby, the shoe man. The two cronies would be swapping gossip, or frequently indulging in a snoring contest, to the amusement of the passers-by. They typified this city of the nineties where modern ideas had not yet disturbed its peaceful calm.

With the closing of the University in June for the summer vacation, quiet reigned until fall. A Free Press reporter at this time wrote that "the city went to sleep the day after Commencement and did not wake up until the University opened in the fall."

The business section of State Street consisted at this time of two book stores, a drug store, and a variety store. The University buildings were cheap and dingy, heated by stoves and lighted by gas. Students roomed in houses, as there were no dormitories, and largely took their meals in clubs that were managed by themselves. The schools of the city had the reputation of being the best in the state, but were housed in ancient buildings that were a disgrace to the city.

About the turn of the century, a younger generation of business men took over the management of stores, schools, and the city government. Main Street was paved, and other streets quickly followed. Manufacturing was encouraged. New, modern buildings took the places of many of the old, the wooden awnings over the store fronts disappeared, and the city began to take on city airs. The University, long the city's chief asset, began a rapid growth. I remember President Angell telling me that he hoped to live to see the University have 2000 students; I am glad to know that he lived to see the enrollment several times this number. The quiet University town of the nineties had grown to be a modern, hustling city of 40,000 busy people. Its growth has not been one-sided either; manufacturing and business have kept pace with the growth of the University. Together

they have given us an ideal residence city. A few of the old-timers still look longingly back to the days of old. They realize that progress brings much that is helpful, but of necessity destroys some things that were beautiful

The autos come, the autos go,
The buses slither to and fro.
The street is filled with hurrying feet,
But no one stops his friend to greet.

After all, though, few of us would like to live in Ann Arbor with conditions the same as the citizens faced in the nineties, when merchandizing was in its infancy not only here but throughout the country.

. . . . .

(Remarks contributed from the audience:)

Ready-made dresses for ladies must have come into general use about 30 years ago, although men's suits were introduced much earlier. One lady related how, during a trip to Europe in 1892, she had bought several ready-made dresses, knowing very well that when she once got back to this country she would never be able to find such a luxury.

Many Ann Arbor drygoods and clothing stores, such as Mack & Co., carried groceries as well...Much trading with the farmers was carried on as true barter...There were no paper sacks or any way of packaging produce that was bought except to wrap it. Mr. Mills added a reminiscence of his early clerking days, while in his teens. A customer wanted 20 pounds of sugar; he spread out a large sheet of wrapping paper and poured pound after pound on it, to his own increasing consternation. Eventually he did succeed in wrapping it up, but the package sagged heavily at both ends and could have been used, he felt, for saddle-bags...Sugar-boxes were made for families by coopers, and often would be carried to the stores to be filled.

Ann Arbor, Michigan
March 20, 1944